

Chapter 5

Psychodrama, role theory and the cultural atom

New Developments in Role Theory

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What are we without our relationships? It is through our interactions with others and the world around us that we make sense of the world and ourselves. We know others and ourselves through this living experience. If we are mirrored adequately when young we have the chance to develop a sense of ourselves, who we are, what we do and don't like. If the mirroring we receive is distorted, we may end up with a sense of ourselves that is not true but rather reflective of others.

In this chapter I present a role theory framework (Daniel 2004) focusing on the concept of the cultural atom, the idea of relationship as a third entity and introduce a new subcategory within the role chart. The work illustrates an expansion of role theory as it is practiced today. I demonstrate the effect of small yet timely interventions and the advantages of a role theory and role training approach in individual and group psychotherapy, touching on the teaching and learning of role theory. Certain viewpoints of Gregory Bateson, Konrad Lorenz, Jacob Moreno and Zerk Moreno are illustrated in relation to the concept of role and role relationships.

Relationship is the essential stuff of role theory. This idea may be familiar to the psychodramatist who understands the twin canon of the social and cultural atom – the social atom being the people in our lives and the tele that flows between us, and the cultural atom being our roles and the relationship between these roles. The core paradigm of role theory is mutuality, imbued by tele. Tele, taken from the Greek, meaning 'at' or 'to a distance,' is a two-way relationship of sense across space. Like the wave and the particle in physics, the social and cultural atom is inextricably entwined. It is a fact of life and a living process.

The social and cultural atom

The essential components of role theory are the roles and the role relationship that exist in any given moment that arises between two or more people. To illustrate this, let's look at a mother and a child, Alice and Bella. The first entity is Alice and the second entity is Bella. The third entity is

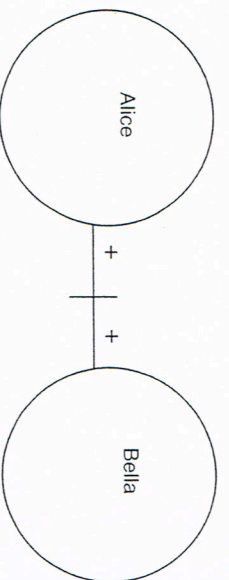
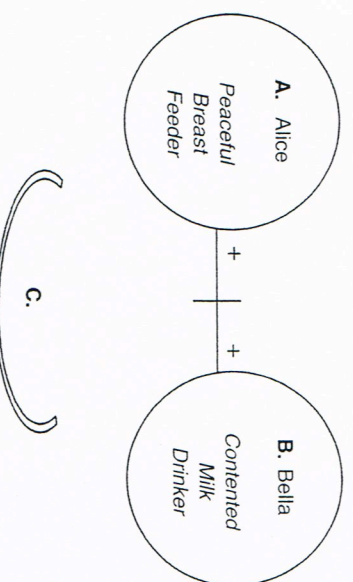


Figure 5.1 The social atom of Alice (mother) and Bella (child): the tele is mutually positive



C. Warm, generous relationship of mutual partaking in life

Figure 5.2 The cultural atom of Alice (entity A) and Bella (entity B). Alice and Bella are in a reciprocal positive role relationship: the Peaceful Breast Feeder and the Contented Milk Drinker. The tele relationship between the two roles is mutually positive and reciprocal. At this point in Alice and Bella's relationship, the role relationship (entity C) is warm and close

their relationship, which manifests through their respective role interactions at any time or place (Figures 5.1 and 5.2).

Role theory and the interactional space

The space *between* people is highly significant because it is here that they can encounter one another and their relationship comes into existence. Take a look at the trees outside, the leaves, the branches, and now look at the spaces between them, the sky or the shadows. These spaces have shape. Just as the breeze changes the shape of the space between the leaves and branches of a tree, so does a change of role affect our relationships. Everything is in relation to something else. Artists and architects know

About this space and recognize it as an essential component in their work. When an artist paints a picture or a photographer takes a photograph, the spaces are always considered and have equal importance with the objects in the scene. The finished painting or photograph shows the whole, an entire picture captured in a moment. Perhaps this is why Jackson Pollock was considered so revolutionary in the beginning, because he didn't define space in the usual way. However, there is spatial definition in his paintings because of the color and its trajectory.

The role of the artist

The psychodramatic role of the artist is useful in the role repertoire of the psychodrama practitioner, since it transcends the limits of knowledge and brings in the faculty of imagination. While words and actions also inform what is seen, a receptive imagination is essential for the knowledge and practice of role theory. Seeing what is in front of you rather than making an interpretation of what you see means seeing what someone is expressing and how the other is receiving it: to see relationship as it is in any given moment. This view of people and the world means that new things can be created for the personality and the world of relationship. Contrary to popular belief, the personality is not set by the ages of five or seven; it is, and has the opportunity, to always be in creation through the development of new roles and the linking and integration of these roles.

The creator of role theory

The creator of role theory and the father of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy was Jacob Moreno MD (Moreno 1934, 1946). Together with his primary collaborator and wife, Zerka Moreno, he inspired a generation of psychodramatists and others in the field of social sciences (for example, Kurt Lewin and Ron Lippitt, two of the founders of the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine, and Fritz Perls in his development of the Gestalt method) to think and use role theory, sociometry, sociodrama and psychodrama (Moreno and Moreno 1959, 1969). Psychodrama has permeated the field of mental health and human services in our community with the result that Moreno's ideas on group psychotherapy, group method and the concept of role are widely applied and known throughout the world, even though many people may not know where these ideas originated.

Role theory is as significant for humanity now as it was in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It has opened up a whole new way of thinking about human beings in relation to themselves and other entities. This has an immense impact on people and their environment because

it proposes that we are always connected to something through our spontaneity and creativity. Even in situations where our values seem to have no relevance or value to another, our spontaneity and creativity can serve us to come up with new and adequate responses, thus opening a path for new paradigms and healthy progressive relationships.

The role theory framework

The role theory framework is a simple and useful perspective and can be applied in one-to-one counselling and psychotherapy, working with couples and families, in business and organisations, teaching the psychodramatic method and in everyday living. It provides an opportunity for insight and invites us to live in the here and now. Whether we talk of the past or the future, we can only be in the here and now.

The role concept

Role theory is at the heart of sociometry and psychodrama. It encompasses the whole person matrix by including the faculties of thinking, feeling and action. Behaviour is part of the role theory matrix yet role theory is not behavioural. Moreno talked of the operational links between the roles and the roles clusters forming a partial self (Moreno 1946). According to him, 'a role is a unit of function and organisation. It is a form of phenomena, more than behaviour, observable in a particular situation in relation to other phenomena' (Moreno 1946: iii). Roles can be psychosomatic (physiological), psychodramatic (psychological) or social and they may overlap.

The three components of a role

A role is comprised of thinking, feeling and action. When thinking, feeling and action are in harmony, the role is described as congruent. Sometimes there are blocks in a role, which can be observed and described as incongruent. A person's thinking and feeling may be synchronised but, even so, the person is unable to act. A person may have the feeling and action in harmony yet no thinking is involved, or, thinking and action are in accord but the feeling component is missing or underdeveloped (Figure 5.3).

The role chart

A role map or chart is used to assess and work with role systems, of the person (intra-role relations) or groups (inter-role relations) with an aim to serve relationship, development and progress. It is divided into three sections:

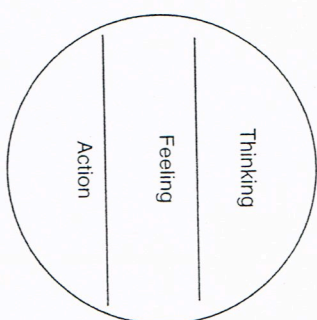


Figure 5.3 The components of a role

- the progressive roles that are reflective of unity and quality of life
- the coping roles that reflect the optimal means of survival in family and social systems
- the retrogressive roles that can contain fragmented aspects of the personality, not linked to the here and now.

I have further expanded the role framework (Clayton 1982; Daniel 1992, 2004) I have used for over 20 years to include the new subcategory of 'freezing' within the coping role category. The framework is a map that is used to look at what is going on in a drama or session at any point of time. All roles are seen in relation to other roles and can only be adequately identified through the use of a role system approach.

The role categories

The progressive role category is divided into two sections: 'well developed' and 'developing'. The coping or survival roles are divided into three sections: 'going towards', 'going away' (withdrawing), 'going against' (fighting) and the new category of 'freezing'. Retrogressive roles are divided into two sections: 'diminishing' and 'fixed' (see Table 5.3).

These are the terms that I use in my teaching and practice (Daniel 2001). Any of the basic types of roles (psychosomatic, psychodramatic or social) may be placed within these categories depending on the situation. For example, social roles: *warm teacher, appreciative pupil*; psychodramatic roles: *lover of life, doomsday prophet*; somatic roles: *secret craver, warm hugger*. However, it is important to understand that 'a role is just a role' (Moreno 1989). It is not until a role is looked at in a context, taking into consideration time and place and its anchoring in the role relationship, that we can adequately name it.

Complementary and symmetrical role relationships

Gregory Bateson (1979) coined the terms 'complementary and symmetrical role relationships.' Complementary roles are best described as having difference, for example, parent/child, lover/fighter, whilst symmetrical roles are those that are similar, parent/parent, fighter/fighter. In some situations, the deliberate taking up of either a complementary or symmetrical role – depending on the situation – can assist people and nations in building relationships, even if they do not like one another, and may serve to break conflicts and stalemates. There are no right or wrong or weak or strong roles; it is a matter of the *adequacy* of the roles in a given context. Establishing whether a role relationship is complementary or symmetrical can be very useful, especially when relationships are bogged down, conflictual or competitive.

The application of role theory in group psychotherapy

In this section, role training with one protagonist illustrates the use of role theory and includes the new role category that I call 'freezing.' Relevant implications for practitioners can be found within the discussion sections.

John is the protagonist. The role training is almost complete. In the first scene he confronted and literally stood over his son-in-law, Sam, in a hotel dining-room. Sam and his wife Rachel (John's daughter) had been having breakfast together. There was a short verbal fight, which ended with Sam getting up and leaving, hurriedly saying, 'I am not having any of this therapy crap.' John had chased Sam and begged him to listen (Figure 5.4).

John's actions were robotic and his body was very tight. He was angry with Sam because he had violated John's values. John felt impotent and was very critical of himself. The role training process had provided some 'time out' of the drama for John. It gave him an opportunity to see himself in relation to Sam and observe their relationship from the mirror position. He was able to see himself as others saw him in relation to Sam, through their mirroring, and then experience several group members as they modeled different roles. I noticed that he was extremely attentive and

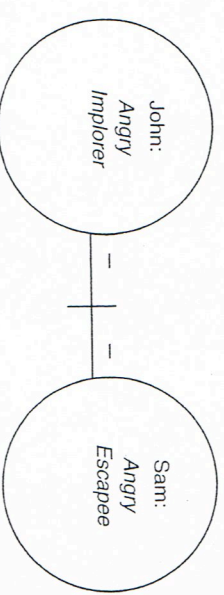


Figure 5.4 The initial role system of John

Table 5.1 John and Sam's relationship of antagonism

Coping (survival) role category			
Going toward	Going away	Going against	Freezing
	(b) Angry Escapee (Sam)	(a) Angry Imploer (John)	

(a and b is a complementary role relationship. The tele is mutually negative.)

thoughtful throughout this process. Table 5.1 illustrates roles mapped in the coping role category, one of three sections that make up the role chart seen in Table 5.3 (p. 75).

The development of a new role

In the next scene, John walked up to Sam and Rachel and said, 'Rachel, could I talk with Sam please.' This was new. In the role reversal with Rachel, she (he) said, 'Sure.' She left, and he sat down opposite Sam. Several role reversals between John and Sam took place during the role test. This time John (as Sam) didn't leave the table, despite being very tense. (Table 5.2 illustrates the change in roles.) Through the role training, John developed new roles in relation to Sam and Rachel.

John realized, for the first time, that Sam was very frightened of him. Back in his own role, he became very tense and red in the face. 'John,' I said, 'Let yourself breathe.' He expelled a big breath of air. I asked him to do it twice more, thus maximizing the role. He realized that he had been frightened. John became calm and thoughtful with this new insight. His body softened. The realization that Sam was frightened of him was very important to him. Celebrating this new knowledge was the next step. The fear that he had felt previously had put him in a role state that he had been unable to shift from. The fear of losing people so precious to him had been intense, so in the moment that he froze he stopped breathing. Slowing down the action and gently coaching John to breathe had served to bring him in

Table 5.2 The new roles

Coping (survival) roles			
Going toward	Going away	Going against	Freezing
(a) Clear Communicator (John, a and b)	(b) Warm Acceptor (Rachel)	(c) Tense Negotiator (John) and (d) Frightened Defender (Sam, c and d)	(e) Frightened Robot (John, b and c)

(a and b, c and d and e and d are all complementary role relationships.)

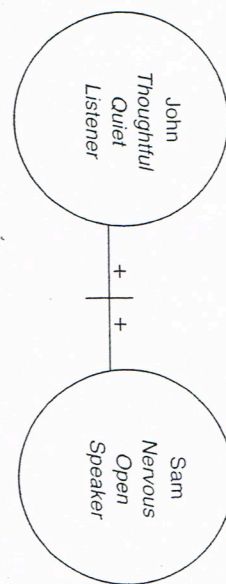


Figure 5.5 John takes a complementary role to Sam – the tele is mutually positive

touch with himself. He was then able to role reverse with Sam and in so doing discovered Sam in all his otherness as himself, as human, in a real encounter (Figure 5.5).

Recognizing and celebrating the new

There is much value in recognizing something not previously seen or known and then celebrating this recognition. We can't know what we weren't aware of so it makes good sense to celebrate the new awareness. This maintains the new role, confirms the here and now reality of the protagonist and assists a person to look forward. It can also stop him or her from unraveling their work or doing themselves in, especially if the person was prone to being critical of themselves. Once a person becomes clear, much of the therapeutic work is done. John had at first been imploring Sam to listen to him. However, now he realized that it was he who had to listen to Sam. In the final stage of the drama, he sat quietly and listened, moving toward his son-in-law with heart and mind. The complementary role of 'thoughtful, quiet listener' enabled him to listen to Sam (see Figure 5.5). The freeing of the breath allowed John's fear to evaporate and his spontaneity to emerge, with the result that his response to Sam was new and adequate. Slowing everything down and encouraging a protagonist to breathe can be very productive when the protagonist is very tense or full of feeling. In the role of Sam, John was more open to talking about his feelings. This was new for both of them, spontaneously begetting spontaneity (see Table 5.3).

Discussion

It is useful to look closely to see how a person is breathing. Sometimes, fear can be a warm cloak – an old familiar role, which a person may not be ready to give up. So to breathe, and get in touch with feelings, can sometimes be frightening. This may mean that many psychodramas are necessary until new progressive roles have developed, or new operational links between roles or role clusters have crystallized, before a person is ready to work on the fearful role. I am not talking about any fear, fear of snakes and

Table 5.3 The role relationship of John and Sam at the end of the role training

Progressive (life) roles		Coping (survival) roles			Retrogressive (inert) roles	
Well developed	Developing	Going toward	Going away	Going against	Freezing	Diminishing Fixed
	(a) Breather of Life Force (John)				(b) Frightened Robot (John)	
	(c) Open-hearted Feeler (John) 1					
	(d) Open, Quiet Listener 2 (John)					
		(e) Nervous Open Speaker 3 (Sam)				
	(f) Insightful Learner (John)					

(a and b, b and c, c and d, d and e and e and f are all complementary role relationships. 1 and 2 and 2 and 3 are mutually positive role relationships.)

Legend: The lines with one-way arrowheads indicate the progress of the roles and the operational links between roles, while the two-way arrowheads indicate reciprocal and mutually positive tele.

so forth but rather a particular kind of fear, which is close to, if not actually, terror, where an aspect of the self has frozen because the person has perceived danger or felt unsafe.

The new category of freezing

Tables 5.2 and 5.3 reveal the role categories that include the new fourth category of 'freezing' within the coping roles category. The creation of this new category came about through the practice of using the role map over a period of time and finding that certain roles didn't fit in any of the categories. The 'frightened robot' for example didn't fit in the going against (fighting), going away (withdrawing) or going toward categories in John's drama. Because he was seen as attempting to cope, I dismissed the possibility of the role being retrogressive. Whilst it could be described as retrogressive in another situation, in the former encounter I viewed it as coping. Practitioners working in sexual abuse and domestic violence situations frequently note the freezing response in their clients or patients. A freezing response can also occur in authoritarian systems and as a reaction to terror, when one's life, physically, psychologically or socially is at risk. Animals know this instinctively. The ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, watching fighting wolves, observed where, at a certain point in the fight, one gives way and becomes vulnerable to the other, through an inbuilt freezing response:

A dog or wolf that offers its neck to an adversary in this way will never be bitten seriously. The other growls and grumbles, snaps his teeth in the empty air and even carries out, without delivering so much as a bite, the movements of shaking something to death in empty air. However this strange inhibition from biting persists only as long as the defeated dog or wolf maintains his attitude of humility. Since the fight is stopped by this action, the victor frequently finds himself straddling his vanquished foe in anything but a comfortable position. So to remain with his muzzle applied to the neck of the 'under-dog' soon becomes tedious for the champion, and, seeing that he cannot bite anyway, he soon withdraws. Upon this, the understanding dog may hastily attempt to put distance between himself and his superior. But he is usually not successful in this, for, as soon as he abandons his rigid attitude of submission, the other falls upon him again like a thunderbolt and the victim must again freeze into his former posture.

(Lorenz 1952: 188)

Using role theory to make interventions

The role of the clear seer (one who sees 'what is') was not present initially in John. His fear had prevented him from seeing Sam clearly, and, he did not

know that he was frightened. It is sometimes the case that protagonists cannot reverse roles until they feel accepted with their feelings. In John's case, thinking and action were together but his frozen feeling of fear had become a block. The role training had assisted John in being seen and heard. As soon as he was able to reverse roles, he experienced a deep catharsis. It was from this experience that a catharsis of integration occurred; the roles became integrated and congruent and John felt at peace.

The use of role theory in individual psychotherapy

Role theory can be applied in individual psychotherapy, counseling, supervision, coaching and consulting. The practitioner is encouraged to see the minutiae and work with small movements or small changes of role, sometimes found in the way a person speaks or the words they use. There can be much potency working delicately and sensitively in seemingly small pieces of work. Being with a person, quietly yet actively listening, mirroring or putting yourself in their shoes through doubling or role reversing can all be very helpful. Shifts in roles or changes in role states can happen suddenly, so it is well if the practitioner is spontaneous and able to go with the flow. Here is an example of a role theory approach applied in individual psychotherapy.

Jude

Jude sat down and said he had a lot on his mind. I got up, picked up a box of tissues from my desk and crossed the room to where he was sitting and gave it to him. As I sat down again, I said, 'Ok, how about you pull a tissue out and say, in your own mind, you don't need to tell me what that tissue is for, and the next one, and so on.' He grinned ruefully and said, 'Have you got enough tissues?' but after pulling the third one out, he turned pink in the face, and tears ran down his cheek. I gently asked him to breathe and just let his feelings, his life force, be there.

Discussion

This was a crucial turning point in Jude's therapy because up to this point he hadn't cried in front of anyone. His family of origin is particularly painful for him; one brother has schizophrenia and rings him many times a day, often verbally abusing him, a sister has a mental illness yet to be adequately diagnosed, and another brother has cerebral palsy. Jude used heroin regularly for ten years but had been free of this habit for two years prior to seeing me. He was still dealing drugs but not heroin. My relationship with Jude was quite strong so I felt reasonably sure that he would follow my instruction. He had been coming along once a week for a few

months. However, I had not used any action up to this point. The element of surprise and the timing of this intervention were also important. Whilst Jude is no stranger to expressing anger, he was relieved and grateful to be able to get in touch with his sadness and to cry.

The use of role theory with couples

Introducing the couple to the idea that their relationship is a third entity can make a profound difference to how they see themselves in relationship. Some people think it is just 'you or me,' right or wrong, weak or strong. Yet in role theory there is no right and wrong or weak or strong; it's a matter of the adequacy of the roles and also the relationship between these roles. Asking the couple sociometric questions such as 'What kind of relationship do you have, right now?' can be useful since it gives them a picture of their relationship and an opportunity to see how the other perceives it. Sometimes I place a cushion between them, which serves to concretize their relationship as an entity. This is often very effective, as they may never have realized that the relationship is their creation. Once people think about what they might do or say, or take on a role to improve a relationship, choice and responsibility for self enters the picture: 'I can't change you yet I can change myself, which will affect us.' This can be a potent motto.

Role interrelatedness

When thinking about a person's role in relation to another, you can think about where it exists, what came before, what came after, what was the response from the other, and what is developing between the two people in the here and now. It's not enough to just put something out, it is important to see how it is being received. If we name a role without observance of the 'other,' and the situation we are in, all we are doing is labeling a person and acting as if this role does not require anchorage in another person's role. This borders on solipsism – the belief that the self is all that exists or can be known. It is wise to keep in mind the interconnected nature of our roles. Roles do not exist in isolation because we do not; we are always in relationship to something.

Teaching role theory

A collaborative involvement of the therapist with the client or the director with a group is advised when teaching role theory or assisting people to look at their role relationships. This is a very interactive process and it involves practitioners' timing and skill. Using a whiteboard or piece of paper, you can list the roles that you observe in your client in relation to his or her significant others. You can start with the general category of a role

and then give it an adjective or the other way round. You can use your imagination and draw pictures on the whiteboard or your client may draw their own diagrams in a journal.

Naming roles is a form of spontaneity training

Naming the roles is not a labeling process but rather a form of spontaneity training. In a training group, directly after the sharing phase of a drama, and a teabreak, a trainer may engage the group in a role-processing phase. After the role chart is drawn on the board, the group members reflect on the drama and endeavor to name the roles that they observed in the drama. After this, the trainer generally invites the protagonist to make some comments, asking which role resonated most within them. Often one role is picked very quickly. Sometimes the trainer might ask the trainee to think of things that they might do to further develop that role, or ask the group members to put forward some ideas, for the protagonist to consider, to maintain the role. In these cases, the process becomes a kind of role training. The naming of roles is a mirroring process and the aim is to serve the spontaneity of the protagonist and the group.

The language of role theory across cultures

The different structure of languages impels us to be spontaneous and to use a certain amount of creativity when naming a role. In English, a role is often named by using one or more adjectives and a noun: big ball – big red ball – big, red, bouncing beach ball on white sand. With each additional adjective a new picture emerges, hence the usefulness of the imagination and the role of language. For example, a certain protagonist loves life, he sings as he rides his bicycle in the wind. In English, we might describe him as an 'openhearted lover of life.' In Russian or in Japanese, for example, we might describe him as 'the man who loved life with all of his heart' or 'the man who sings while he rides his bicycle.' It doesn't really matter, what is important is getting the essence of the role in its context. For example, 'Marco Polo' may be the role description of an adventurer about to leave home for the first time and venture out into the world. The use of the imagination is not bound by language differences.

Implications for practitioners and trainers

Directors could use the images that appear in their minds as they work with their protagonists. They often have an intuitive perception yet forego the formal charting of roles, valuing instead their warm-up and that of their protagonist or group. It is not always necessary to make role diagrams, even in training workshops, as this may create obstacles in your warm-up

and bring in something extraneous to your relationship with your protagonist. What a role theory framework provides is a structure for looking at our roles and the relationship between them. A role or personality profile doesn't exist as an entity in its own right. The role diagram is a dynamic structure in charting social and cultural atoms and is relevant only to the here and now. It must be used wisely.

The real self

We can reframe words that people use to describe themselves through habit, or to correct distorted mirroring of the self, in role theory terms. This semantic flexibility is constructive because it avoids any trend towards pathologizing labels. New role descriptions can be an effective and specific therapeutic intervention. For example, if a child is told often enough that he is naughty (but in reality he is just a child with a lot of energy, climbing trees and generally being curious and inventive), he may develop an inaccurate and negative view of himself. New mirroring may reveal to the adult person that he was and is a 'bold adventurer' and full of life. Seeing oneself through accurate mirroring may enable a person to change how they see themselves and their world. When people are accurately mirrored, they are often more energized, spontaneous and in touch with their real self. They are then more likely to make new decisions or keep on with what they are already doing with greater confidence. According to Christopher Bollas, the true self is that which is able to be spontaneous: 'The true self listens to a Beethoven Sonata, goes for a walk, reads the sports section of a newspaper, plays basketball and daydreams about a holiday' (Bollas 1989: 21).

Conclusion

When we express ourselves through our roles and continually develop and maintain our role relationships, role theory becomes a living process. Only then can we really grasp what people are doing and get a sense of them as they are in relation to their world (and us). Role theory is refreshing because of its here and now nature and the fact that it addresses each person's creative potential. Anything is possible in this realm. New things emerge. This is what it is to be in the present. Let's use our creative inspirations and images as they appear. This is essential if we are to develop and sustain positive, mutual and life-affirming role relationships in our work and life.

Note

The names and details of the people in this chapter have been changed significantly to retain confidentiality.

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